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ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY

WISCONSIN GROWS TO
Statehood

Immigration and Internal Improvements

James I. Clark

The State Historical Society of Wisconsin

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The State Historical Society of Wisconsin
Madison, 1955

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Immigration and Internal Improvements

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JAMES I. CLARK

“WHY ALL THIS ADO about the West?” asked the editor of the Milwaukee *Commercial Herald* on a summer day in 1843. To him the West meant Wisconsin, and he answered his own question:¹

It is because our Territory, in her mines of copper and lead, in her illimitable forests of Pine, possesses more vast sources of wealth

than any other country on the face of the Globe. These resources, together with our fertile Prairies, fine, healthy climate, and great natural advantages, watered by Lake Michigan on one side, and the Mississippi on the other, together with our interior navigable streams, and beautiful little Lakes, render Wisconsin Territory the fairest portion of the Great West.



1842 view of Southport (now Kenosha).

A lot of people had agreed with him, and more were going to. Thousands came West to share in such riches. Some traveled up the Erie Canal, then took a steamboat from Buffalo. Others went overland, on a Conestoga wagon, on horseback, or walking behind a handcart. It was part of the Westward movement, during which the land between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi filled with settlers. Immigrants spread out over Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, and after 1830 flowed up into Michigan and Wisconsin.

Some went not to work the land, but to speculate on it. Others went to build homes and make new starts. Still others went just because they wanted to. As one pioneer put it, "The tradesman foresook his shop, the farmer his plough; the merchant his counter; the lawyer his office; nay, the minister his desk, to join the general chase. . . . The man with one leg, or he that had none, could at least get on board a steamer, and make for Chicago or Milwaukie."² The Panic of 1837 slowed the movement a little, but in two or three years confidence returned and the westward trek continued.

There was another side to the coin, of course. Some of those who stayed home took a dim view of emigration. "The *western fever* still prevails, and is rendering our churches a desolation in some places," wrote an unhappy Virginia minister to a Richmond paper. "Are they going to be more useful? No—they are going to make money. . . . It is utterly wrong—it is sinful—wicked." Another Eastern writer was even more sour: "The rapid overrunning of the Great West, at the rate of about a king-

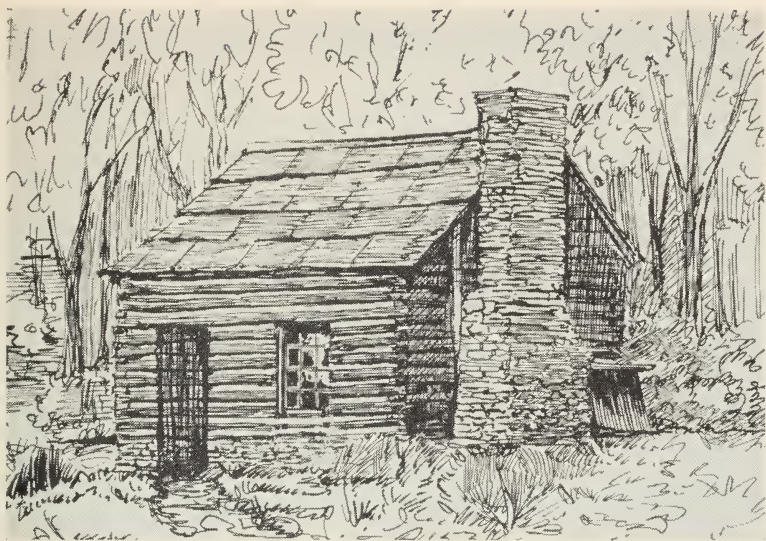


Front page of February 5, 1834 edition of the *Green Bay Intelligencer*, first newspaper in Wisconsin.

dom a year, is one of the *great evils of our day*, which will be felt for generations to come in the prevalence of ignorance, habits of idleness . . . *Lynch-law*, etc."³

Wisconsin Land Boom

Such words had little effect on those who wanted to go. The opening of land offices in Mineral Point and Green Bay in 1834 greatly speeded the settling of Wisconsin. New settlers increased Mineral Point's population to 1,500 in three years and the town boasted four public houses, seven drygoods stores, and a brewery. Town lots were selling for



Sketch of Milwaukee log cabin of the early 1840's.

\$100 to \$800. Citizens of Green Bay set up buoys to guide ships into the harbor. By 1837 the former fur post and mission had at least 1,000 people, several stores, two churches, a bank as well as three hotels.⁴

The story was much the same along Lake Michigan. In 1836, the year Wisconsin became a territory, a pioneer wrote:⁵

Milwaukee contains about fifty houses, mostly on the east side of the river; it is supposed to contain (with the suburbs) about 1,000 inhabitants! Town lots are worth from \$500 to \$5500. Lumber is from \$30 to \$50 per thousand feet. Flour \$8.25 per barrel and everything else about the same proportion. Labor is \$1.25 per day and boarding, which equals \$2 per day. The mail arrives and departs once a week and has just brought papers that I saw in Detroit.

That represented quite a change in a community that two years before

had been little more than a trading post for trappers and Indians.

Some hardy individuals pushed into the northern pine forests. Treaties with the Menominee, Sioux and Chippewa in 1836 and 1838 opened large areas on the upper Wisconsin and the St. Croix. Saw-mills erected in those regions represented the beginning of what later became an important Wisconsin industry. Towns like Hudson, La Crosse and Wausau were settled in the early 1840's. Farming in the area was discouraged by those who wanted to work the trees. The best and most easily cleared lands were in the southern parts of the territory anyway, so most immigrants settled in those regions. By 1845 the population of northwestern Wisconsin and a part of Minnesota numbered only about 1,400 people.⁶

Hardships, privation, dusty or muddy roads and crowded boats mattered little to those going West. "We



Walk-in-the-Water, first steamboat on Lake Erie, in the 1820's.

are still here waiting for the snow to go off and roads to settle, so that we can move on to Wisconsin," wrote a nineteen-year-old immigrant boy. "The snow is slowly melting away but the roads are horrid, even the streets of Chicago are almost impassible. Our people are all well but we are all impatient to leave here and be settled in our future home."⁷

"Shades of night and my great grandmother," wrote a Wisconsin-bound immigrant after a steamboat trip to Detroit. "Here is crying & scolding & snoring & groaning. Some in births & some in chairs & trunks & settees & the rest on the floor . . . Some are stretched on beds, others on matrasses & cushions & not a few are trying to find the soft side of the hard floor."⁸

Lakeshore villages got many of the

immigrants. However, high winds on the lake often prevented the landing of boatloads of newcomers, as well as cargoes of goods. Villages with unimproved harbors often regretted seeing the boats steam on to Chicago. As the back country became productive, clamor for harbor improvements increased. Shipping agricultural and other products from lake ports and receiving goods to be sold to farmers meant considerable business.

Villages on Lake Michigan hired lobbyists and sent many petitions to Congress asking for aid in building harbor facilities and lighthouses. They pleaded safety for lake travelers, and pointed to Wisconsin's vast potential for supplying Eastern markets. However, the government was Democratic, and Democrats were against spending federal money for

internal improvements. Even so, it seemed odd to citizens of Racine, Milwaukee, Kenosha and other villages that money should be appropriated for Eastern river and harbor improvement. Chicago also seemed to get at least some money for that purpose. Wisconsin writers never hesitated to point out those facts. Milwaukee finally received \$30,000 and Kenosha and Racine each \$12,500, but that was about the extent of federal harbor aid during the entire territorial period.

Before they received their \$12,500, Racine people got tired of waiting for federal help and built their own harbor. Extending the mouth of the Root River by building two 500 foot piers into Lake Michigan afforded protection for lake boats docking at Racine. The project was paid for out of the pockets of citizens of the village of about 2,000 by personal subscriptions and by a special tax on real estate. Some other villages, Kenosha for one, also put local money into harbor improvement.⁹

Canal Building Boom

Getting produce to those ports was one of the first problems faced by Wisconsin settlers. Increasing the volume of goods shipped East would of course increase the income of those interested in lake shipping. Reducing the time and cost of getting things to market would benefit producers. Roads were too poor for any large amount of long-distant hauling. Thus natural waterways connected by canals were given first consideration in Wisconsin, as in other parts of the Northwest.

The success of the Erie Canal set the whole Northwest to dreaming of

vast networks of waterways crisscrossing every state. As the enthusiasts thought and promoters talked, the smallest creek grew wider and deeper, and a steady stream of heavily-loaded canal boats could be seen bringing wealth and population to the most hidden and remote corners of the region.

Raising funds for such systems posed a problem. Under the administration of Andrew Jackson the flow of federal money for internal improvements of all kinds slowed to a trickle. About the only aid from Washington came in grants of land which could be sold to finance public works. That wasn't enough. States had to raise more money on their own and charter private companies to get the canals dug.

In the midst of the expansion and prosperity of the early 1830's few worried about where the money was coming from. States could easily issue bonds. As a result of improvements, more settlers would flock in, land values would rise, tax receipts would increase, waterpower rentals and tolls on the various sections of the canals would provide income, and the bonds would be paid off in a short time. It was a fool-proof set-up.

Land grants were sold, states went into debt, companies were chartered and contracts let for materials and labor. Usually it was discovered that the project cost more than had been anticipated, and there was occasional crookedness in handling the money and providing materials. Many more ditches existed on paper than were actually dug. For example, an Indiana expenditure of \$156,000 on a "canal or railroad" line from Fort Wayne to Michigan City resulted in

nothing more than a wagonload of surveyor's notes. The Panic of 1837 dealt a hard blow to many projects, although some states like Ohio were able to keep some of the work going and complete a few canals. In Indiana, a \$13 million debt had accumulated by 1839 and all work on internal improvements stopped. Hundreds of contractors were bankrupt, even more laborers were without wages. The vast water network planned for Illinois didn't get under way, and that state found itself in debt for many years to come.¹⁰

Wisconsin Canals

Wisconsin canal projects centered on getting lead from the southwestern mines to ports on Lake Michigan. Products from those mines then reached Eastern markets by way of the Mississippi. That was a long and costly route. Periodic low water hindered shipping. Many people in the lead region wished for cheaper and more convenient ways to get their products to market.

Certain enterprising individuals in the growing communities on the lake shore were alert to the advantages of diverting the lead traffic eastward. As early as 1836 Green Bay people advocated the construction of a railroad. They pointed out that upward of \$110,000 a year in shipping costs could be saved on the nearly fifteen million pounds of lead then produced annually by southwestern Wisconsin.

Those having interests in the Erie Canal were also eager to see Wisconsin lead. A Buffalo paper reminded capitalists that those "interested in the lake and canal trade . . . should not delay in aiding the construction of a canal or railway

from Milwaukee or some other point on Lake Michigan and the Mississippi river." Canal officials were willing to reduce toll charges on lead shipped from Wisconsin.¹¹

Lacking a railroad or the means to build one, a group of men at Green Bay led by Morgan L. Martin boosted the Fox-Wisconsin rivers as an avenue of transportation for the lead region, as well as for the produce of farms along the route. Henry Dodge had shipped some lead to Green Bay as early as 1829. During the 1830's Daniel Whitney used the rivers as a route to the Great Lakes and the East for shot produced at his tower at Helena, on the Wisconsin river.

The portage between the two rivers and the rapids of the lower Fox presented serious obstacles to continuous traffic. A considerable amount of money would be needed to overcome them. In 1839 a federal survey placed the cost of improvement at almost a half-million dollars.

Seven years later Congress granted every alternate section of land one and one-half sections wide along the entire course of the Fox. The Fox River Improvement Company, formed about that time, was empowered to sell the land to raise money for the project.

The work progressed slowly. It was January 1851 before a canal was completed at the portage. Five years later locks had been constructed at the rapids near DePere, and the steamboat *Aquila* completed the trip from the Mississippi to Lake Michigan. By that time lead production had fallen off, and little was shipped that way. The route was too long and winding to be of much use



Morgan L. Martin.

to the lead region anyway. Agricultural products and lumber moved along the waterway, but not enough to keep the company going. It later went into bankruptcy and the equipment and locks were eventually purchased by the federal government.¹²

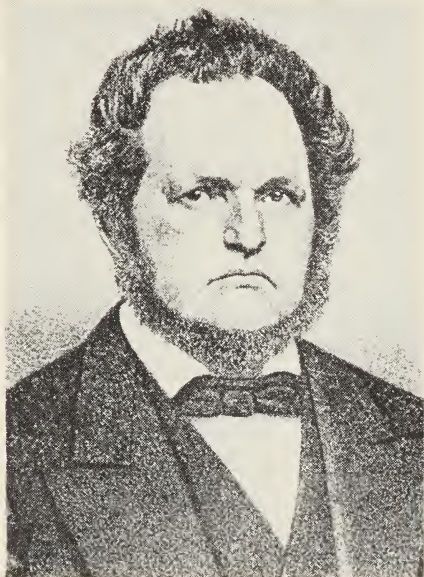
While the Green Bay promoters tried to swing support to their route, a group of men led by Byron Kilbourne in Milwaukee worked on another scheme. In 1838 the Milwaukee and Rock River Canal Company was formed to construct a canal from that city to the Rock river. Once completed, a continuous water route would be provided from the lead region to Lake Michigan. Farmers on or near the canal would of course benefit from cheap and rapid transportation to market.

The total cost of the project was estimated at \$800,000. The odd-numbered sections of land within five miles of each side of the proposed route were granted by Con-

gress, amounting to 140,000 acres. The land was to be held in trust by the territorial government and sold to provide money for the work. The company was also permitted to sell \$100,000 in stock.

The canal didn't get very far, however. Work ended after one section from Milwaukee was completed. Opposition to the project came from various sides. Settlers along the route objected to paying \$2.50 an acre for land they felt entitled to buy under federal land laws at half that price. Those favoring the Fox-Wisconsin route opposed the Rock river scheme. Other people wanted money and energy poured into railroad construction instead.

In 1841 the Legislature withdrew all support from the company and it folded. The Territory was left with land on its hands and a debt of the company to settle, plus legal



Byron Kilbourne.

entanglements stemming from some of the land sales to settlers. The debt was carried into statehood, and thus Wisconsin didn't entirely escape bad consequences from the canal craze, although the troubles were not nearly as bad as those of some other states.¹³

Territorial Roads

Very little lead ever went to the lake shore by water, but some did travel overland. In 1836 Henry Janes, founder of Janesville, broke a trail to the southwest corner of the territory and returned to Racine with two wagon loads of lead. Travelling the route had its difficulties though; it was not an all weather road, and it took several days to travel the 180 miles with ox teams. In September 1841 the Milwaukee *Sentinel* reported that "six teams loaded with upward of twelve tons of shot, arrived in town from Helena on the Wisconsin." The paper went on to urge that roads be improved, in order "to secure this valuable trade to this place, as it will add much to the increase and prosperity of Milwaukee."

Support for trans-territorial roads came from the western side too. The *Grant County Herald* pointed out in 1843 that 26,000 pigs of lead were on hand at Potosi and 5,000 at Cassville, awaiting the spring arrival of boats. "If we had a good road to Lake Michigan," said the editor, "Milwaukee would get that slice sure." Toward the end of the 1840's "schooners" carrying about two tons of lead apiece and drawn by six or eight yoke of oxen, had become familiar sights in the streets of Milwaukee and other lakeshore towns.

Pay loads went both ways—drivers returned to the lead region with lumber, shingles, salt and merchandise.¹⁴

Regardless of the ambitions of lakeshore enterprisers eager to cash in on the lead trade, probably no more than five per cent of the lead mined ever travelled to the East by way of the Great Lakes until after railroads were built. Canal schemes didn't work out and roads weren't certain enough in all weather to present serious competition to the Mississippi river traffic. In 1845, for example, the Racine *Advocate* reported that up to July 1, thirty tons of lead had arrived at that village. Although the *Advocate* thought that was pretty good, considering the several thousand tons produced in a year at the mines, it didn't amount to much. Two years before that, Milwaukee shipped about 1,000 tons. That was more than Racine, but still only a small portion of the total Wisconsin production.¹⁵

Not all the wealth of the territory was in the lead mines, or along canal routes or waterways. Many farmers struck inland away from natural means of communication. Farmers were not quite self-sufficient, even then. They needed roads to get their produce to the village stores, where they could trade for knives, bridles, sickles, sheep shears, and trace chains. Their wives and daughters needed cooking utensils, calico, pins and needles, sugar and salt.

The villages were equally interested in the farmers. "What is a farm worth, though it be beautiful, if it be surrounded by an impassable quagmire?" asked the Mineral Point *Miners' Free Press* in July, 1838. "And of what value is the business

of a town, if the people of the country are deterred from visiting it by the dangers attending at attempts to pass the ravines and rocks by which it is surrounded?"

Financing Roads

Pleas for road building funds too often found the members of Congress hard of hearing. Thanks to convincing arguments of military necessity, \$17,000 had been appropriated for a road connecting Forts Howard, Winnebago and Crawford. The Black Hawk War helped persuade Congress that such a system of communication was needed. The road was built by soldiers from the three forts, begun in 1835 and finished about two years later. Across the open land and prairie the road was little more than a path between two furrows plowed in the soil. Ravines and streams were bridged and a path cut through forested areas, stumps being left in the road and hollowed out so as to collect rain water and rot more quickly. It was no superhighway, and in wet weather, as with most roads of the time, it was "as slippery as noodles on a spoon."¹⁶

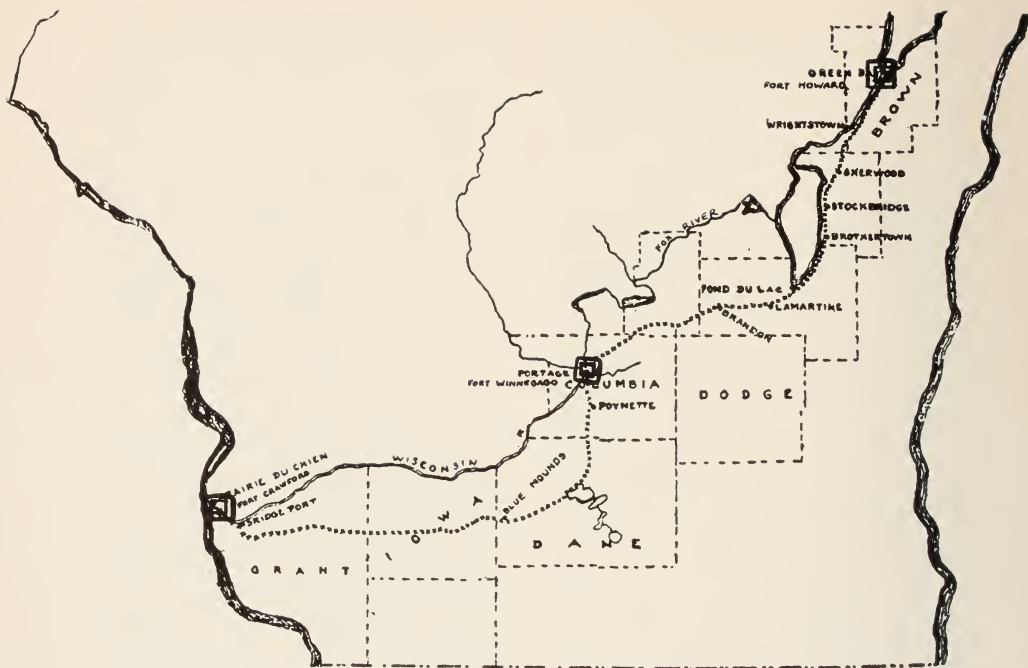
In 1838 fifteen thousand dollars were granted for a similar road from Chicago to Green Bay. Traveling that was no joy either, as one pioneer attested, after riding an ox-drawn covered wagon over part of it:¹⁷

We drove in three days from Milwaukee to Saukville, where we found shelter overnight in a house, the first we had had on our journey. We now took a military road . . . Never having been graded, it was very rough. In crossing a bridge, the covering, which had become rotten, gave way and let

the cattle [oxen] through. However, they did not go to the bottom, as the yoke stuck across a stringer and suspended them by their necks. Here they hung helpless, with their feet dangling like the pendulum of a clock, until my brother-in-law could cut the stringer and let them down into the ravine below. No material damage was done, and we resumed our journey. We had not gone far when in passing between two stumps the wagon caught fast.

Farmers and villagers turned to the Territorial Legislature for roads. At each meeting, it was besieged with requests to allow construction. Permission to build was readily granted, but no money was forthcoming. The Territory depended largely on the federal government for operating money and could raise little of its own. Thus the cost of road building fell on the counties and villages. Counties were authorized to elect commissioners or supervisors to oversee road construction and could hire surveyors and other labor at fixed rates of pay.

Taxes on real estate paid for construction. Usually the tax amounted to \$1.00 for each \$1,000 worth of property. In some places it ran as high as three or four dollars. If a person didn't want to part with cash, he could pay his taxes by working one or more days on the road. An individual furnishing a plow or wagon with horses or oxen and a driver for one day's work could receive credit for three days' work himself. There is a record of a Walworth County court sentencing two men to pay a fine of eighty dollars to be worked out on the highway, for having stolen and butchered an ox, in-



Map of Military Road from Fort Howard to Fort Crawford.

dicating another way sometimes used to get roads built.¹⁸

Branch routes off the military roads were built, running to Mineral Point and the lead region, and from Fond du Lac to Milwaukee. Other roads were run west from Kenosha and Racine. Sheboygan and Manitowoc made connections with inland towns. Various villages in the lead region were joined by roads. Another of the early Territorial highways connected Milwaukee and Madison. People traveled it with difficulty. They went, as one experienced person wrote, "jolting over the projecting roots of the blazed trees among which the wagons wound, now striking with violence against the body of a tree they could not dodge, now sinking to the axle in the partly

frozen mud, and now again bumping over corduroy bridges, extending in many places from 50 to 100 rods in length, across swamps that would otherwise be impassable."¹⁹

As road networks extended from town to town across the country, stagecoach service was begun. For a price a person could have the privilege of being jolted and tossed from Milwaukee to Mineral Point, and even to Galena. Schedules often meant little, and frequently paying passengers had to get out and help push the coach out of a mudhole, or walk across an unsteady bridge. It was transportation though, and coaches carried mail as well as passengers and light freight.

Taverns along the routes depended on good roads. With stagecoaches

passing with some regularity, most inns could be sure of travellers stopping for food and lodging. Sometimes, in order to spread the business, stage drivers routed the passengers out early in the morning to get them to the next stop for breakfast. People grumbled, but it was get up, walk, or wait for the next stage.

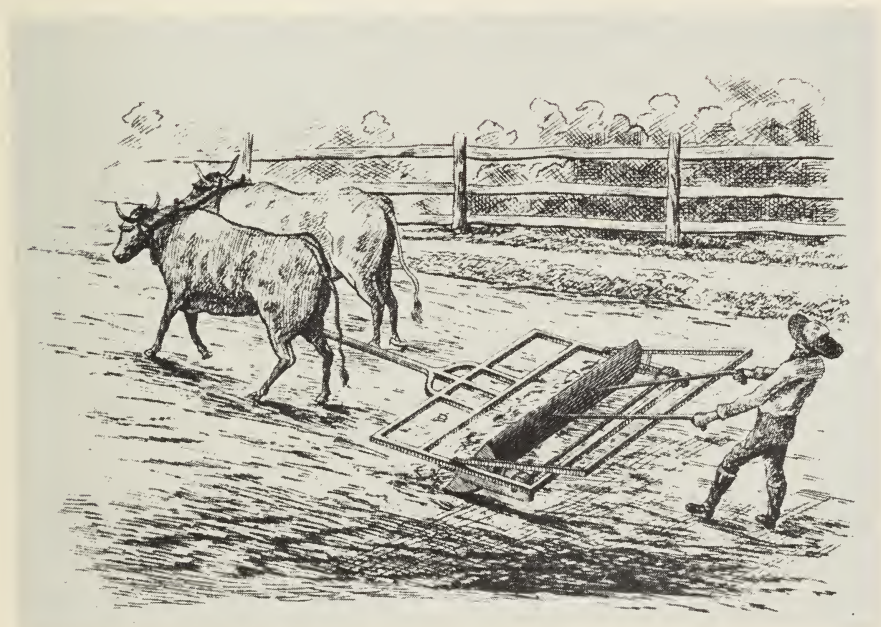
Keeping roads in good condition was often more difficult than getting them built. Once again, it was up to the local government to get the work done. Sometimes the roads were forgotten, except by those who had to use them, and apparently even they were reluctant to do much save complain. "Do the people repair the roads?" asked a letter-writer to the *Racine Advocate* in 1844. "I believe that they set and look calmly and quietly on, waiting for him who

doeth all things, to put the road in repair, which I trust he will do, if dry weather comes on soon."²⁰

Wet weather always made traveling hazardous. Two men bound for Oshkosh in the fall of 1850 found two road direction signs loose on the pole "pointing downwards through some of the deepest sloos it was possible to imagine."

We congratulated ourselves that neither up nor down on *those* roads lay our course, but soon were taken aback by finding that we had fallen into worse hands. Such tenacious mud! . . . the next 8 miles are undescribable, but, in justice to the roads across them, I desire to say that we found *no sloos over 10 feet deep*, and the bottom was generally good *when we came to it*.²¹

Roadbuilding equipment used in Territorial Wisconsin.



Better Roads Arrive

Better construction materials were needed. An improvement did arrive toward the end of the territorial period, in the form of plank roads.

Private companies built plank roads, and charged tolls to get a return on the investments. Three inch oak beams were laid on both sides of the road, about five feet apart. Across the beams were fixed eight to nine inch oak planks, shoved together as tightly as possible. Material for the roads came from oak groves along the way, and some plank was shipped into lake ports and transported to where the roadbuilding was progressing at the time.

The first, and probably the most successful plank road in Wisconsin was built from Milwaukee to Watertown. The total cost of the road was about \$119,000. Toll houses erected as three-mile intervals along the route brought in as much as \$1,300 per week. Rates were usually one cent per mile for vehicles drawn by a single animal, and half a cent extra for each additional animal.

Enthusiasm for improved roads and for what appeared to be a money-making idea prompted a deluge of applications for charters to the Territorial Legislature. In the final session of that body, sixteen charters were granted for roads, many of which remained innocent of planks. In 1849 the State Legislature passed a general plank road law, which was said to be "long enough to pave an ordinary road," so many were the provisions felt necessary to insure good construction.

Not all the stock in plank road companies was paid for in cash. Pro-

moters accepted labor and materials in exchange for stock. Those living along the proposed route entered agreements in the record book like,

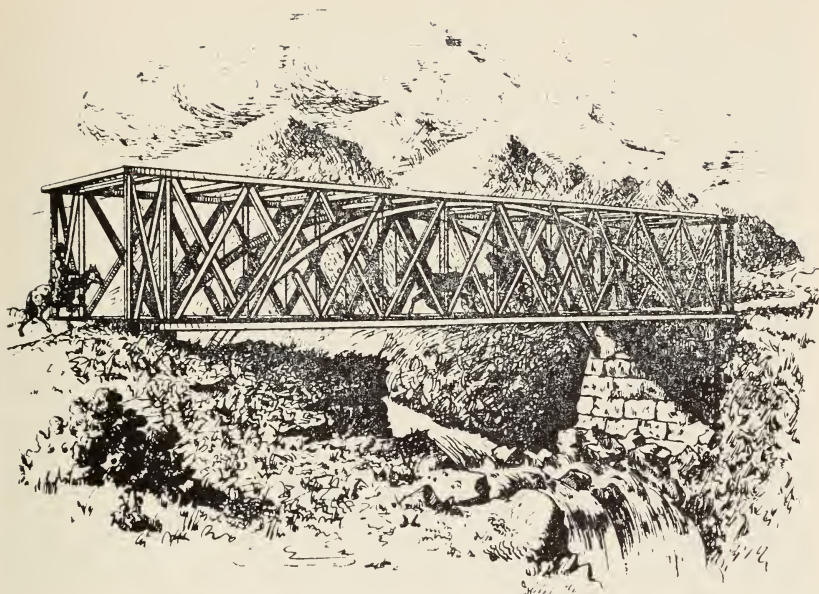
I will pay Three Hundred Dollars as follows: Seventy-five per cent in work in grading the track, twenty-five per cent in such manner as the company directors may require after the first day of October next, this subscription is made on condition that the company run their road within a distance of 4 rods of the Section line north of my dwelling house.

Others subscribed "teaming, boarding men and work on the road" to purchase stock. Some merely promised to pay with materials, such as road-building "S. B. Reed, in plank, 5 shares, \$100.00."

Plank roads made everyone happy. Now there was a way of getting to market regardless of the weather or the season of the year. Stage lines could come nearer to keeping schedules, and mail would move more rapidly and safely. Such roads, it was confidently expected, would last indefinitely, or for ten or twelve years at least.

As it turned out, under the pounding of hooves, wheels and Wisconsin weather, many roads lasted three or four years at the most. The boards came loose and rotted, and in many cases were never replaced. Maintenance of plank roads was as slow and uncertain as that of other kinds of roads had been.

Farmers' happy smiles turned to frowns when they discovered that the hard boards made animals stiff and hurt their feet. Unshod oxen slipped on the smooth planks and refused to travel the roads. Toll paying became



Type of bridge used in the 1840's.

a nuisance, and in many cases travelers made wide semi-circles around the toll houses to avoid paying the tariff. Plank roads were not innocent of mud either. Collections of dirt became sticky in the rain, and made the going rather slow and slippery.²²

The Coming of Railroads

Something more was needed. Immigrants continued to flow into Wisconsin and more farm land was taken up. Villages became cities. The agricultural output of the territory climbed steadily. The early production of corn soon turned to wheat and by 1840 almost 200,000 bushels were produced each year.

Merchants anxious to get that wheat placed ads in the papers, like "5,000 bushels of good, clean winter wheat wanted," in exchange for "Hot air cooking stoves; Parlor Box

Stoves, all of the best kind—cheaper than the cheapest." Other ads called for "Wheat at 50¢ per bushel—Oats at 15¢ per bushel. Hides and tallows and most kind of country produce. *"Cash not refused!"*"²³

In the southwestern part of the territory agriculture was fast replacing lead mining as a major occupation. As lead production decreased, the local market for crops became poor. "Such has been the increase of farms and farmers that the mining interest does not furnish a market for a tithe of the agricultural product which a liberal and reliable price would call forth," wrote the editor of the *Lancaster Wisconsin Herald* in June 1848. Transportation facilities were needed to handle large quantities of that produce and deliver it to lakeshore cities. Some could be used there, and some could be shipped further east.



Inn at Greenbush, on Sheboygan-Fond du Lac plank road.
Completed in 1851, now a museum and historic site.

There was only one solution to the problem: a railroad. A line across the territory would provide a way of moving produce and consumer goods independent of uncertain water and road transportation. At the same time, it would serve to unite the territory, draw the east and west regions together in a common interest, for the western part could use the manufactured goods produced and imported in the eastern part.

Railroads had proven themselves in the East, and lines were being constructed as far west as the Great Lakes region. There was already talk, in the 1840's, of uniting the Atlantic and Pacific with a continuous railroad across the country. Wisconsin promoters saw their area as an important link in that great east-west line. Late in the 1840's the editor of the *Potosi Republican*

pointed out that a railroad from Milwaukee to the Mississippi would

serve as a continuation, or rather connecting link between the Milwaukee and the Mississippi, and the chain of the Great Pacific Railway. And thus connected it needs no great foresight to see the immense travel of the Upper Lakes, diverted from its road, from Milwaukee via Madison, Potosi and Dubuque, through all the delightful and varied scenery of Wisconsin and Iowa, to the Great Metropolis of the West, St. Louis, and thence onward to the far western States of Oregon and California.

Of course, that view favored Milwaukee as one terminal and Potosi as the other. And in 1844 a legislative railroad committee had reported that a line between those points "is not only practicable but that no

route can be found in the United States of the same extent, giving the same promise of profit, upon which a road can be built cheaper than upon this one." The total cost was estimated at four million dollars, one reason perhaps why nothing came of the project at that time.

Other towns had other ideas. Racine and Kenosha felt as qualified as Milwaukee for the lake terminal. Cassville, Prairie du Chien, and La Crosse were certain that they should have the Mississippi end of the line. Beloit and Janesville were as interested in having the tracks pass their way as was Madison. Counties north of Milwaukee tended to support a Sheboygan-Fond du Lac-Mississippi line, or failing that, the improvement of the Fox-Wisconsin instead.

From 1845 on the Legislature was overwhelmed with petitions for railroad charters from various would-be companies. A Sheboygan-Fond du Lac and a Lake Michigan-Mississippi Railroad Company were chartered, but they never laid any track. A correspondent of the *Galena Gazette*, perhaps prejudiced, wrote, "The only points on Lake Michigan and the Mississippi to be connected with a railroad for the next fifty years are Chicago and Galena."

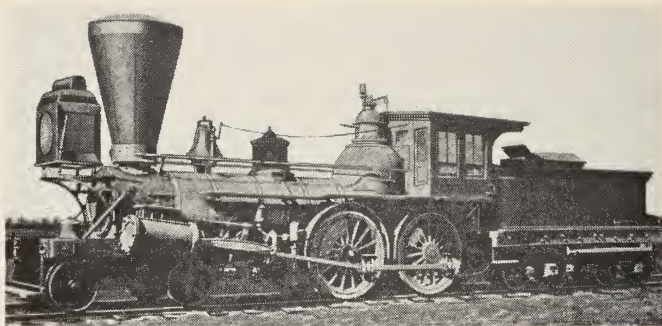
He was a little off in his figuring. Perhaps the opening of the Chicago to Galena line in 1848 stirred Wisconsin interests to action. The 1847 Legislature authorized a line from Milwaukee to Waukesha and the following year extended the charter to the Mississippi. The Milwaukee-Mississippi Railroad Company began selling stock and within a short time \$100,000 was raised. Surveys be-

tween Milwaukee and Waukesha began in June 1848.

The money raised from the stock issue didn't cover construction costs to Waukesha. Money was still needed to complete the line and buy rolling stock. Another means of financing had to be found. Eastern capitalists remembered the canal-building difficulties in western states. When they examined the relative scarcity of population and production in Wisconsin they were reluctant to risk money on a railroad there.

Then someone came up with a unique solution, something entirely new in railroad financing. Why could not the farmers who would benefit from the line mortgage their property to raise money? The plan was advanced in a public meeting held by railroad officials. Interest on the mortgages would be at eight per cent, and the railroad would pay dividends of ten per cent. Farmers saw that they couldn't lose on that. They would have their railroad, and make money on it besides. Many farmers, in their enthusiasm and impatience to complete the railroad, had already got out with teams and equipment to help grade and build bridges and lay rails. Now they would go even further.

Between 1850 and 1857 about six thousand farms were mortgaged to the extent of nearly five million dollars. The possibilities of profit looked immense. Few farmers received any of that easy money, however. Railroad promoters were not entirely honest in their dealings. The mortgages were sold in the East for fifty to seventy-five per cent of face value. Interest on the mortgages was not always cancelled in favor of divi-



First locomotive used on a Wisconsin railroad.
Called the "Bob Ellis" and the "Iowa."

dends as the company had promised. The rude awakening came with the Panic of 1857, when all roads in the state went bankrupt, and a good many farms were lost. The bad memory of that experience lingered in Wisconsin for many years.

In the meantime the Milwaukee-Mississippi was built. The first train ran from Milwaukee to Waukesha on February 25, 1851. The grand event was reported in the Milwaukee *Sentinel* the next day:

The opening of the Milwaukee and Mississippi Railroad to Waukesha, 20½ miles, was celebrated yesterday in fitting style. Notwithstanding the unpromising look of the weather, and the superabundance of mud in the streets and roads, the Railroad Depot was thronged at the hour appointed for starting, and the accommodations provided by the Company taxed to the utmost to convey the passengers offering. About 250 of our citizens, including many ladies, took seats in the excursion train, which started on its westward way, soon after 11 o'clock, amid the cheers of a multitude of spectators gathered around the Depot. Hess' Band ac-

companied the train, and woke up melodious echoes as it sped along. After making sundry stops along the route the train reached Waukesha about 1 o'clock, and was received with shouts of welcome by a crowd of our country friends.

By April there was one passenger and one freight running each day. Three years later the line had been extended to Madison. In 1857 the railroad was completed to the Mississippi river.

The location of the western terminal had remained in doubt for some time. Various Mississippi towns contended for the privilege of being the rail end. Prairie du Chien took matters into its own hands in 1853 and asked the Legislature to charter a Madison to Prairie du Chien line. The result was a consolidation of that company with the Milwaukee and Mississippi, and the line ended at Prairie du Chien.

Soon another line had crossed the state. The year after the first railroad reached Prairie, the La Crosse and Milwaukee got to the river. Before long other lines were being extended north from Chicago. Wisconsin dreams of being an important

link in an Atlantic-Pacific system were never realized. More powerful interests had similar plans for Chicago and Memphis, Tennessee. But Wisconsin did get railroads, and for the time farmers and townspeople alike were satisfied.²⁴

Wisconsin in 1850

By 1850 more than 300,000 people lived in what a short time before had been wilderness and lonely prairie. Immigrants continued to arrive, cities were growing, the countryside filled with farms and villages. The nations of the world were represented. Welsh, Germans, Norwegians, Irish, English, Poles, Belgians, Swiss and many others found homes in cities and on farms in Wisconsin. "Men with European tongues gather in here like the dispersed tribes of Israel," wrote one observer in 1845. Another immigrant, looking over the state in 1850, wrote:²⁵

Truly, if you observe Wisconsin in its total activity, its many-sided

businesses, see its blooming, richly endowed grain fields, its attractive houses and cheerful people, it is very difficult to make yourself believe that all of this has been created in a short fifteen years. We see here, however, what man can accomplish when he is given a free opportunity to establish his fortune with his own hand. Here in the sunshine of freedom every labor becomes a pleasure, and its product is the compensation of his exertion.

By a network of transportation systems the various parts had been drawn together. The extensive deposits of lead gradually thinned out, and the gold rush of 1849 drew many miners away to richer fields. Other products of the soil took the place of lead; those products and those of the growing manufacturing centers and of the pine forests were being distributed about the state and reaching Eastern markets in ever-increasing abundance. Wisconsin had taken its place among the states.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in *Racine Advocate*, July 12, 1843.

² Caroline M. Kirkland, *Western Clearings*, (New York, 1845), 4-5.

³ *Green Bay Intelligencer*, January 27, 1836; *Racine Advocate*, July 12, 1843.

⁴ R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest* (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1950), 2:133-34.

⁶ Quoted in Bayard Still, "The Growth of Milwaukee as Recorded by Contemporaries," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 21:262-92 (March, 1938), 268.

⁶ Cardinal Goodwin, "The Movement of Settlers into Wisconsin and Minnesota," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 17:406-28 (1919), 414-16.

⁷ "Letter of George B. Smith," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 5:406 (1921-22).

⁸ "Charles Minton Baker's Journal," *Ibid.*, 398.

⁹ On harbors, Moses M. Strong, *History of the Territory of Wisconsin* (Madison, 1885), 385-86, 421, 485; *Racine Advocate*, various issues, 1842-45.

¹⁰ Buley, *Old Northwest*, 1:490-508.

¹¹ Quoted in Orin G. Libby, "The Significance of the Lead and Shot Trade in Early Wisconsin History," *State Historical Society of Wisconsin Collections*. 13:322; *Green Bay Intelligencer*, January 20, 1836.

¹² On the Fox-Wisconsin canal project, Gouverneur K. Warren, *Report on the Transportation Route Along the Wisconsin and Fox Rivers* (Washington, D. C., 1876); W. A. Titus, "Early Navigation on the Fox and Wolf Rivers and Lake Winnebago," *Wisconsin*

Magazine of History, 25:16-30 (September, 1941); *Green Bay Intelligencer*, December 11, 1833, March 5, 1834, February 3, 1836.

¹³ Strong, *History*, 265; "Memorials of John H. Tweedy," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 8:349-60 (March, 1925), 355-56; Matthew B. Hammond, "Financial History of Wisconsin Territory," *State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Proceedings*, 1893:149-56, 167.

¹⁴ Lancaster *Grant County Herald*, April 22, 1843; Libby, "Significance of the Lead and Shot Trade," 321-22, fn.

¹⁵ Mary Dopp, "Geographical Influences in the Development of Wisconsin," *American Geographic Society, Bulletin*, 45:401-920 (1913), 657-59; *Racine Advocate*, July 1, 1845.

¹⁶ H. E. Cole "The Old Military Road," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 9:47-62 (1925-26).

¹⁷ Quoted in John R. Gregory, *History of Milwaukee* (4 vols., Chicago, 1931), 1:274-75.

¹⁸ "Autobiography of Charles M. Barker," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 8:445-53 (June, 1925), 449; Hammond, "Financial History," 160, 161-63; E. J. Wehmhoff, *Road Legislation and Administration in Wisconsin*, Unpublished B. A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1901.

¹⁹ Quoted in Gregory, *History of Milwaukee*, 2:268.

²⁰ *Racine Advocate*, July 2, 1844.

²¹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 28, 1850.

²² On plank roads, Gregory, *History of Milwaukee*, 1:277-80; "Christian Traugott Ficker's Advice to Emigrants," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 25:217-36, 331-55, 456-75 (December, 1941, March, June, 1942), 352; Record Book and Other Papers of the Oshkosh and Waupun Plank Road Company, 1852-1856, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Manuscript Collection; *History of Milwaukee, Wisconsin* (Chicago, 1881), 1413-14.

²³ *Racine Advocate*, February 8, 1843.

²⁴ On early Wisconsin railroads, E. D. Holton, "Address," *State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Collections*, 4:275-77; William F. Raney, "Building of Wisconsin Railroads," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 19:387-403 (June, 1936); Herbert W. Rice, "Early Rivalry Among Wisconsin Cities for Railroads," *Ibid.*, 35:10-15 (Autumn, 1951).

²⁵ First quote, Josiah B. Grinnell, *Home of the Badgers* (Milwaukee, 1845), 11-12; "Ficker's Advice to Emigrants," 354.

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An excellent general account of the Northwest Territory from 1815 to 1840 is R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest* (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1950). This set is packed with material on political, social and economic history during that period.

H. E. Cole, "The Old Military Road," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 9:47-62 (September, 1925), relates the story of the building of the road and travel on it. Cole's *Stagecoach and Tavern Tales of the Old Northwest* (Cleveland, 1930), contains much information on social life in the territorial period and covers the era of the stagecoach generally.

An excellent account of Wisconsin as a territory, seen through the eyes of an Englishman, is the anonymous *A Merry Briton in Pioneer Wisconsin*. This "Merry Briton" spent part of 1841 traveling about the southern portion of the territory, in Racine, Janesville, Madison, Green Bay and other towns and this book is the result of his adventures and impressions. It was published by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1950.

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